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One Who Was There Assesses the CIA's Job in Laos

A brief article in The Washington Post of December 27 quoted Congressman G. V. Montgomery as saying "What I know about Laos is that the CIA has done a pretty lousy job and has been ineffective."

One could answer such an assertion by simply saying that as the chairman of the House Select Committee on U. S. Involvement in Southeast Asia, he should know more about Laos than that, particularly when what little he knows is manifestly wrong.

I spent 17 years as a CIA employee and left in early 1968 because of my basic opposition to United States involvement in Southeast Asia. My last four years in the agency were totally involved with Asian affairs. My knowledge of what CIA has done and has not done are obviously more detailed than Mr. Montgomery's, but it seems to me that if he is going to make public statements, he should at least take into consideration facts which have been well publicized.

It is clear (at least to me) from the Saigon dateline on the piece in question, that the congressman arrived at his remarkable conclusion after discussion with military sources in Vietnam who have been itching for at least six years to expand their own operations into Laos. Their desires in this direction must increase daily as the American role in Vietnam winds down. If they don't find something new, the time may come when they have no war at all to fight.

In order to assess CIA performance in Laos it is necessary to know what it was asked to do.

CIA involvement in Laos stems from the agreement by the U.S.A., and other powers involved, to withdraw all foreign troops from Laos. The agreement was signed in 1962. It became apparent immediately thereafter that the North Vietnamese, in violation of the agreement, were continuing to send irregular forces and supplies to the Communist Pathet Lao. Their purpose was clear—to establish a Communist government in Vientiane which would allow the North Vietnamese free access to the portion of the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos and the road across central Laos to Thailand. The government of the United States decided to mount an operation to thwart the North Vietnamese purpose. Because the Geneva agreement precluded the use of U.S. military forces or advisers, CIA was designated as the executive agent to handle the training and support of the non-Communist Meo tribes who lived in and around the Plain of Jars. The Meo force was the only army in Laos capable of stopping the Pathet Lao (supported by the North Vietnamese) from quickly over-running the Plain of Jars, which was essential to the Communist purpose.

The point to remember here is that the decision to act was a U.S. government decision; not one arrived at by CIA. I think the decision was wrong, just as I think almost every other decision with regard to our involvement in Indochina has been and continues to be wrong. That is not the point under discussion.

The question is: what kind of job did CIA do with the task assigned it in Laos?

The answer, based on any comparison with the U.S. military effort in Vietnam, would have to be. *A spectacular success.*

My personal knowledge of the operation ended in mid-1967, the last time I visited Long Tieng, the seat of the headquarters of Gen. Vang Pao, the Meo leader. At that time there were roughly 35,000 Meo tribesmen under arms fighting daily with the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese irregulars. This force had been fighting successfully for five years and inasmuch as they held Long Tieng until a few days ago, continued for another four years to beat off a vastly superior Communist army. The CIA contingent supporting them in Laos and in Thailand did not exceed 40 Americans, plus a small air contingent which air-delivered supplies and personnel. Imagine 40 Americans in support of 35,000 friendly tribesmen. Compare this with the situation in Vietnam in 1967 when we had about 400,000 U.S. troops fighting for, and supporting, an army of roughly 1 million Vietnamese, and they were losing at every turn. Had the U.S. Army had the responsibility for the support of the Meo, we probably would have had a minimum of 15,000 U.S. troops in Laos. Naturally that figure would have included cooks, bakers, pastry chefs, many chauffeurs for the many generals, PX managers, laundry officers, radio and television station personnel, motion picture projectionists, historians, social scientists, chaplains and a variety of similar types essential to the conduct of a war by the U.S. military, but which the CIA operation with the Meo seemed to be able to forgo.

For eight years this ragtag force defended its area of responsibility, protecting the backside of the South Vietnamese—with no U.S. troops fighting at their side, not to say in front of them as in Vietnam. They accomplished this with the support of a handful of Americans and with the loss of perhaps three or four American lives.

Can anyone seriously suggest that this was a lousy job?

In fairness to Congressman Montgomery, it is not entirely his fault that he is not fully informed. The role of the CIA with the Meo has been an open secret for years; known to Lao of high and low degree, foreign journalists, diplomats in Vientiane and almost anyone else with the interest to find out. Given this situation it would be comic if it were not tragic that the Executive branch of the U.S. government was willing to share this secret with Lao generals known to be trafficking in opium, but not with the Congress of the United States.

Perhaps someday Mr. Montgomery and his colleagues in the Congress will establish a real CIA watchdog committee, long overdue, which will give the agency the scrutiny required. When that is done I am sure a substantial number of lousy operations will be uncovered. I am confident, however, that when they take a long hard look at the CIA operation with the Meo in the general context of the war in Southeast Asia, there will be general approval.

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Washington.

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